

# Reading Logs: Integrating Extensive Reading with Writing Tasks

Reading literature is an excellent way for students to make progress in English language learning; it exposes them to exciting plots, interesting characters, and authentic dialogues as they learn the language in context. Reading assignments also make it practical to integrate the other skills: students speak and listen when they discuss the texts in small groups, and write when they perform pre-, during-, and post-reading activities. In spite of these benefits, the wrong approach to reading literature can make it a boring and frustrating endeavor. If the texts are too difficult, if students do not know the objectives, and if instructors have no guidelines for assignments or assessment, reading is drudgery for students and teachers alike.

During a presentation by Waring and Cramer (2007) I learned about the great potential of *extensive reading* for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, and this method became a springboard for changes

in my approach to teaching reading. Extensive reading motivates learners to read a large number of texts on a wide range of topics because the students themselves select the reading material based upon its relevance to their interests, knowledge, and experience. Students read texts that match their language level, and they choose the time and place to read. Extensive reading “is generally associated with reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material” (Bamford and Day 1997). In other words, the purpose is to get the main idea of the text rather than a complete, detailed understanding of every grammatical, thematic, and discourse element, as would be done with *intensive reading* tasks. Extensive reading allows students to find pleasure in reading as they gain a general understanding of literary ideas, learn reading strategies, acquire new vocabulary, and increase their English proficiency. Since students read a large amount of material both

inside and outside of the classroom, it is important for the teacher to make the objectives clear and properly monitor the students' progress. This includes knowing how to make reading interesting for students and also what assignments and assessment procedures contribute to a successful reading project.

This article will discuss the rationale for using extensive reading of literary texts in the EFL classroom and describe how to integrate writing tasks with a reading project by using a *reading log* (also known as a reading journal, a response journal, or a reading diary) for pre-, during-, and post-reading activities. Finally, I will describe assessment procedures for the combined reading and writing tasks.

### **Benefits of extensive reading**

Effective reading skills are especially vital in the EFL context because exposure to spoken English is scanty, and reading is very often the only source of comprehensible and meaningful linguistic input that helps unconscious acquisition of the language (Krashen 1981). In addition to decoding sounds, words, and sentences, reading requires upper-level thinking skills and social awareness (Burns 2003). As they confront new ideas, readers use their background knowledge and experiences to construct meaning and form opinions about problems that derive from the text. For those who want to be creators and independent thinkers, literacy goes well beyond simply knowing how to read and write. In both the native and foreign language, *critical literacy* requires more than passively absorbing what is on the printed page; "it requires attaining a deep understanding of what is read, remembering important information, linking newly learned information to existing schemata, knowing when and where to use that information, using it appropriately in varied contexts in and out of school, and communicating effectively with others" (Graves, Juel, and Graves 2000, 24).

Over the years, numerous studies have reported that extensive reading benefits language learners in a variety of ways, including in the area of critical literacy. These studies claim that prolific readers noticeably improve their reading proficiency, reading habits, reading fluency, and vocabulary retention, as well as writing and spelling (Nation 1997).

In addition to gains in a range of language skills, students experience delight in language learning and positive feelings as extensive reading motivates them for further study and reading. Gee (1999) argues that the more we read, the more competent language learners we become, and the more we enjoy reading; the more we enjoy it, the more we read, and the more competent language learners we become. This cycle consolidates language learning in other important ways as well: we gain more competence in the target culture and acquire broader background knowledge for more complex reading.

When students read in a foreign language, there is often a tendency to focus more on new words or structures than on content or opinions (Freebody and Luke 1990). This happens not because the readers are incapable of reading for content due to their limited knowledge of the target language, but because they very often do not know *how* to make reading more meaningful. For example, language learners should know that numerous strategies are available to obtain information from the text as well as to get aesthetic pleasure out of reading. For this reason, I designed a project in which extensive reading goes hand in hand with writing activities. My main concerns were to arouse students' interest in reading literature in English (novels, short stories, poetry, and even songs); to give them tools to make reading more meaningful; and, through writing, to enhance their overall language skills.

### **Developing an extensive reading project**

An extensive reading project based on literature is most appropriate for more advanced EFL students. Literary texts can be difficult to process, although appropriate materials for younger and less advanced learners do exist. This project may be adapted to different students' needs and interests, classroom challenges, and curricular requirements. (See Table 1 for a sample timeline for a 12-week extensive reading project.)

The four guidelines described below are essential to an extensive reading project.

#### **1. Students choose the reading material.**

To take full advantage of reading, students should enjoy and be motivated by the reading materials. Since a major

Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think of, read about, and discuss the goals and benefits of extensive reading.</li> <li>• Talk about how people read in their first and second languages, and discuss any similarities and differences.</li> <li>• Talk about what the students are excited to read and write about.</li> <li>• Review various lists of worldwide bestsellers and consider ways to obtain the books.</li> <li>• Students review books that are at home and at school to get an idea of the books' subject matter and level by leafing through them and reading bits at random.</li> <li>• Discuss why some of the books are appealing and others are not.</li> <li>• Students compare samples of a few texts to see which of them is most comfortable for their language level.</li> </ul>
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students begin selecting books.</li> <li>• Consider various ways of organizing reading logs, and meet with students who have already completed reading logs and are willing to give a few tips.</li> </ul>
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students select books and begin reading. Make sure that students have selected a book to read and enjoy.</li> <li>• Brainstorm on entries that students might choose for their reading log or discuss the ones they are working on.</li> </ul>
Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students report to class about the book they have chosen, the number of pages they have read, the complexity of the vocabulary, and plot development.</li> <li>• Students continue working with their reading logs.</li> </ul>
Week 8	Students report on how they are getting on with reading, problems they have encountered, and emotions and feelings they experience as they read and write.
Week 11	Students recount their experiences in both reading and writing. Since they have finished the book by now, it is time for them to give an overview of the book and to recommend or not recommend the book to their classmates.
Week 12	Students submit their final reading logs.

**Table 1. Timetable for extensive reading project**

aim of the project is to make reading pleasurable, students voluntarily choose from a large amount of materials those texts that they want to read. Students select reading material by looking for the genres that they like in their mother tongue, flipping through as many books and magazines as possible. They can also take advantage of talking to students who read a lot or who have already read the book that stirs their interest. They can buy books, borrow them from the library or from friends, or download reading material from the Internet.

**2. Students choose the right difficulty level.** Finding a comfort level in reading is absolutely vital to fully appreciating the text and getting the most pleasure out of reading. Because excessive length or complexity might prevent students from enjoying the materials, students should carefully review the length and difficulty when selecting a text. They should leaf through the book and read a few pages here and there to see whether the vocabulary is acceptable to their level and if they can follow the ideas. Authentic materials written for native speakers of English often pose a chal-

lenge for language learners. However, the wide variety of materials available in various genres makes it possible to find texts at an acceptable difficulty level that will not frustrate the reader.

3. **Students create a community of readers.** When they are engaged in extensive reading, students can exchange books, help one another with advice, review each other's work, and complete tasks in groups. More often than not, learners need to talk to somebody about the text to be able to understand it fully and appreciate it aesthetically. We learn with more depth and understanding when we are able to share ideas with others, consider alternative points of view, and broaden our own perspectives. The urge to discuss comes from the need to confirm and clarify ideas and make sense of the author's message; as such, sharing problems and successes is crucial, especially with those new to the project. Without the appropriate interaction, oral or written, comprehension might be hindered or distorted. To initiate this type of interaction, at the beginning of the project I invite experienced students to class and they talk in small groups about books they have read and ways to work on the project. I also put up a poster for students to write down the texts that they recommend and do not recommend to others. For example, students can use the following grid to list the name of the text and provide a short comment on why they liked or disliked it, which will help other readers with the decision-making process:

BOOK/TEXT TITLE	RECOMMENDED	NOT RECOMMENDED
1.		
2.		
3.		

4. **Students keep a reading log.** Students use their reading logs to regularly write down various aspects related to their extensive reading. Completing the entries in their reading log at pre-, during-, and post-reading intervals helps students learn strategies to enhance

reading comprehension, activate new vocabulary, and develop the writing skill. In addition, the reading log is a vehicle for peer review and various forms of assessment.

### **Using reading logs**

Students use reading logs to maintain a written record of their personal reactions to the text on several levels. The logs are an opportunity for students to express their attitudes towards a text, reflect on their discoveries, and make connections between what they know and what they are learning. A reading log is a place to take risks, speculate, ask questions, express opinions, and build knowledge, giving students the ability to grow as strategic readers and independent learners. Writing helps students integrate different sources of information and organize their thoughts; as a result, their thinking is more fluid, flexible, and tangible, "thus promoting conscious awareness and deeper comprehension" (Dorn and Soffos 2005, 47).

Extensive reading entails reading widely for pleasure, without the interruption of exercises such as daily oral reports or difficult reading comprehension questions. Therefore, a reading log should not disrupt the goal of extensive reading, but rather should become a part of the overall project. Although they are different skills, reading and writing supplement each other in the learning process because of what they have in common, including awareness of the composition process, discourse conventions, and rhetorical elements that make up literary texts. Therefore, a reading log is an ideal method to ease access to literary texts. The various sections of a reading log activate background knowledge and introduce strategies to help students recognize the difficult features of setting, narration, plot, characters, and theme.

### **Reading comprehension and vocabulary strategies**

Awareness of those reading strategies that help learners understand the text is essential for reading success; according to Farris, Fuhler, and Walther (2004), reading strategies fall into two main categories:

1. **Comprehension strategies** help students better appreciate the text. Some

of these strategies include brainstorming, skimming for general meaning, scanning for special details, asking others for help, stopping to summarize, taking notes, making outlines, and engaging in self-reflection and peer review. These comprehension strategies help readers activate background information, predict upcoming events, visualize scenes, summarize the story, compare and contrast ideas, monitor understanding, analyze and synthesize information, and express valid opinions.

2. **Vocabulary strategies** help students deal with unknown words. Students practicing extensive reading learn to skip unknown words and continue to read; however, on occasion it is helpful for students to attempt to guess a word by looking at the surrounding context.

When they successfully apply these and other strategies, learners become deeply engaged in reading and change the way they think and learn. Teachers can use these strategies to develop the following components for the reading logs that will receive entries at one of the pre-, during-, or post-reading stages of the extensive reading project.

#### **Components of the reading log**

##### **Comprehension components of the reading log**

Following are several suggestions for comprehension components to include in the reading log. There is a difficulty range to the components in that some require finding information in a text, while others require analyzing or synthesizing information to make and defend an opinion. The teacher can offer simpler components to the students who are just beginning the project, such as a simple character description, or more complex components for more advanced students, such as writing a summary.

- **Guess what the book might be about.** Predicting is a common pre-reading technique to activate background knowledge, focus the reader's attention, set the mood of the story, and establish a purpose for reading. Readers can

often predict the content of a story by looking at the title or chapter headings, scanning the table of contents, and reviewing any pictures, tables, figures, or graphs. Other ways to predict content include reading the blurb on the cover, the introductory paragraphs, or other short excerpts from the text. The information gleaned from these activities may reveal much about the content and make reading easier and meaning more accessible, especially if the information awakens a student's own background knowledge or experience with the subject matter. Even if the predictions are wrong, the reader will be curious and want to start reading to check his or her predictions.

- **Comment on a passage or sentence from the text.** As a during-reading activity, the student writes down part of the text that contains an intriguing idea or puzzling situation, whether it is a sentence or a longer passage, and then interprets the idea or situation by writing extended comments.
- **Make a poster featuring one of the characters in the story.** The reader develops a poster containing a picture (drawn or cut out from a magazine) of a character in the story that exhibits some special physical or personality trait. These traits are labeled, and a quote from the text backs up the descriptions.
- **Write down questions and answers.** When readers have questions about something in the story, they write it down with a possible answer or solution; later, they can see whether the author gives the same answer or solution. Readers learn to ask diverse questions, including (1) *inferential questions* that entail analyzing facts and reading between the lines to make logical suppositions regarding subtle meaning or the true point of view of a character, and (2) *critical questions* that are evaluations that readers make based on their values and experiences. Critical questions concern "whether certain topics should have been included, whether the arguments the author makes are valid, whether the writing is biased or objective" (McKenna and Stahl 2003, 168).

- **Speculate about information gaps.** If the story does not say where or when events happened, the reader can speculate on the answers. This can also be done for clothes the characters might be wearing, the food they might consume, or the houses where they might reside.
- **Read a review.** After reading a review of the story, the student writes down the reasons he or she agrees or disagrees with the reviewer.
- **Write a letter.** The student, acting on behalf of a character in the story, writes a letter to the editor of a newspaper or to an advice columnist like “Dear Abby” regarding an issue that is relevant to the story. If another student in class is reading the same story, he or she can write a reply.
- **Imagine filming the story.** Students reflect on what scenes from the story they would include in a film if they were the director. They write down how they would film special scenes and explain why they would choose certain actors for the film.
- **Provide your own ending.** Students provide alternate endings for the story.
- **Give opinions about the story.** Students write comments in two columns labeled “What I did not like about the story” and “What I liked about the story.”
- **Write down aspects of the culture reflected in the story.** Readers compare and contrast cultural aspects in the story with their own society. After describing them, the readers can predict potential misunderstandings that might occur between members of the two cultures.

In addition to the list that the teacher offers, students can devise their own components to suit their needs and interests and to express other feelings elicited by the story. For example, if students have started reading a book, and halfway through it they realize they do not find it exciting any longer, they can put it away and begin another one. They might then compose an entry that would explain what prevented them from finishing the story.

#### Vocabulary strategies for the reading log

Extending vocabulary is a challenge for most EFL learners due to the lack of exposure to English. Since books are often the only available source of authentic English, learners should seriously consider reading as a very effective alternative to other ways of enriching vocabulary. Books have current real-life language and language variety; they also contain language that is used in appropriate contexts, not as isolated language units (Larimer and Schleicher 1999). The meaning of words is not fixed, and can change with the context, and students will come to realize that extensive reading is an ideal way to learn the different shades of meanings and nuances of English vocabulary. Reading widely helps learners increase their range of language knowledge and develop a feel for English. This is especially true because people do not learn things in one pass; some researchers say an individual needs to come across a word 17 times to learn it. Course books often focus on introducing new language but not on the amount of review necessary for acquisition, whereas literary texts recycle words and grammar structures and provide an opportunity to consolidate the language. Nation (1997) states that to remember a word, a learner has to keep meeting the word by doing reading in large amounts and/or engage in language-focused activity, such as keeping vocabulary notes.

Following are a few suggestions for vocabulary strategies to include in the reading log:

- Students do not need to write down every new word or phrase—only the ones they find useful and necessary to know.
- Students should attempt to guess the meaning of the new word before looking it up. They can use the surrounding context by rereading the sentences before and after the unknown word.
- Students can arrange vocabulary entries in various ways in the reading log, such as providing English definitions, illustrating the meaning through sentences either from the text or a dictionary, or creating a semantic web.
- Students should be discouraged from collecting single words; people rarely speak by using only separate words, but instead use phrases, word combina-

tions, and even whole sentences (e.g., What brings you here? or Hold your horses!). My students know that if their vocabulary section contains just isolated words, this task will be considered partially failed.

- Students are taught that their vocabulary entries are more successful if they make use of the new words in subsequent written tasks.

In addition to these vocabulary learning strategies, I usually encourage my students to think up a new method or try out a technique they have never used before; old ways are not necessarily the most effective ones. The number of words in the vocabulary section is not that important. However, for a typical literary text a vocabulary component with only 20–30 entries will count only if students prove that the text does not abound in advanced or useful vocabulary by making a copy of several pages from the text and attaching it.

#### **Structure and format of the reading log**

Of course, there are multiple ways to structure these components in a reading log. Often, the structure will depend on (1) the students' reading habits, (2) strategies they want to develop or improve, and (3) the books being read. Although the type of reading log is negotiable, the teacher might assign specific components for all students or only require certain components (for example, "summarize the story," for students who need to practice this skill). However, teachers should not forget that a main purpose of reading extensively is to enjoy reading, which is why written tasks should not become overwhelming. Therefore, teachers should be clear on the components and provide samples for each writing task and should also specify the required number of pages per semester and inform students of how assessment will be conducted. Following are three ways to organize the components of the reading logs:

1. Students make entries (no restriction in number or length) that pertain to all available components. They fill in the entries regularly but in any way they want to, making their reading log very personalized and diary-like.

2. Students make entries for at least five components: three are mandatory and two are elective.
3. The teacher stipulates only the number of components and the length of the entries, and the students make their own choices about what components to use.

Finally, how students use the reading logs can be organized in various ways. For example, the whole class can use the same format, the whole class can choose among a few formats, or each student can use his or her individual format. Depending on the students' needs and classroom challenges, I try to vary the format of the reading logs each semester by introducing new and more complex components.

#### **Assessment procedures for an extensive reading project**

The assessment of the extensive reading project will depend on the ultimate goal of the teacher or the program, the students' level, the type of entries, and other factors. Many programs use multiple forms of assessment, which when taken together offer a complete picture of student achievement. For example, it is always worthwhile to consider self-assessment as one form of evaluation, for when students assess themselves they must think about their learning, which often clarifies useful strategies and new techniques and contributes to independent learning. While self-assessments are not graded, they do provide valuable input and can contribute to the overall evaluation process. Self-assessment is as easy as asking students to answer a few questions about their reading:

- What have you learned about reading in this class?
- How do you feel about extensive reading?
- How do good readers read?
- What do you need to do to be a better reader?

Likewise, peer assessment of student reading logs provides valuable data and an alternate perspective of student achievement. In addition, students benefit from peer assessment because it requires them to recognize and evaluate successful reading strategies and

quality work, thus reinforcing their own learning. Some sample peer assessment items might include the following:

- What did you like best about your partner's reading log entries for the week?
- Write one positive thing about your partner's reading log.
- Write one thing your partner needs to work on.

Reading logs resemble the alternative form of evaluation known as *portfolio assessment*, since they contain a growing collection of student work throughout the project and provide a record of student accomplishments over time. An efficient method to evaluate student progress and achievement throughout the project is to use the reading logs as the basis for formative and summative assessment. *Formative assessment* measures student progress throughout the course at regular intervals (e.g., weekly), while *summative assessment* measures achievement and is done at the end of the project. Since my students complete one reading log every semester, I assess their entries formatively along the way to keep track of their progress. This helps me see students meet established goals, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and guide them to completion of the project, at which time I conduct a summative assessment of the reading log.

Different types of scales can be used to assess student reading logs. For example, a basic rubric that can be used for both summative and formative assessment involves checking the reading logs and rating each of eight categories on a scale of (1) Excellent; (2) Very Good; (3) Good; or (4) Needs Work. The categories are:

1. **Observations.** The student makes interesting observations and asks relevant questions about the plot, characters, setting, language, or other textual elements.
2. **Quotations.** Quotations from the text are accurate and relate to some important feature in the story.
3. **Comparisons.** The student notes differences and similarities between characters, themes, language, or other textual elements.
4. **Reflections.** The student writes about how the story makes him or her feel, or

relates events from the story to his or her personal story or to current events.

5. **Summaries.** The student presents a coherent review of a chapter or the whole story.
6. **Analyses.** The student writes insightfully about the motivations of the characters, the resolution of the plot, or the reliability of the narrator.
7. **Synthesis.** The student uses high-level reasoning skills to show the relationships between the story and other events, such as relating the underlying theme to human experience.
8. **Vocabulary.** Vocabulary entries illustrate appropriate strategies and include a variety of difficult words, grammatical structures, and colloquial expressions.

Finally, for all assessments it is crucial that students clearly understand the assignments and the criteria that will result in their grade. Obviously, the eight categories presented above must be part of the assigned reading log in order to be part of the assessment process. In addition, students should be informed of things to avoid, such as copying verbatim from the Internet or other sources, filling up their vocabulary section with basic high-frequency words, and displaying plentiful grammatical and spelling errors that seriously interfere with meaning.

## Conclusion

Although it is not always the case, reading can be a favorite activity in the EFL classroom. The key is to follow the principles of extensive reading: students select books that interest them, they read at their own level and pace, and they do not let unfamiliar vocabulary or expressions derail the pleasure of reading. Extensive reading of literature is a fruitful way to learn English, and when it is combined with writing tasks in the form of reading logs, students will arrive at a deeper understanding of reading strategies, literary elements, and the English language. The success they experience with extensive reading will be revealed in their reading logs by an understanding of the motives of characters, a description of an unfolding plot, and reflections on how the story relates to their own experiences. Through the connection with literature, students become inspired to offer

their opinions and tell their own stories; as a result, they gain confidence as readers, writers, and independent learners. With clear guidelines and objectives, extensive reading offers students the opportunity to not only recognize how they learn, but also to actively participate in that learning.

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